

AESTHETICS OF HINDUSTANI MUSICAL FORMS

Thakur Jaideva Singh

The late Dr. Ananda K. Coomarswamy was vehemently opposed to the use of the word 'aesthetics' for 'artistic experience'. But by usage, the word has come to mean 'artistic sensibility', 'artistic experience'. We need not get bogged down in semantics. *Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by D.D. Runes gives the following meaning of the word, Aesthetics, "the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty or the beautiful, especially in art, and with taste and standards of value in judging art." It also means a theory or consistent attitude on such matters. In this paper, therefore, "aesthetic experience and judgment" of the beautiful in art and "artistic experience of the beautiful" have been used as synonymous.

Prof. Knight, in his *The Philosophy of the Beautiful* complains that Indians had no idea of the beautiful in art, and even such a great scholar as Prof. Max Muller thought that the beautiful as such did not exist for the Hindu mind. But Samskrta Poetics is full of words like *saundarya*, *caruta*, and *ramaniyata* expressive of beauty in art.

And what is meant by beauty in art by Indian aestheticians? This is what Panditaraja Jagannatha has to say in *Rasagangadhara*, "रसणीयता च लोकोत्तरल्हादजनक-ज्ञानगोचरता", "Ramaniyata or beauty is the experience of transcendent delight." (*Rasagangadhara* I, 1). Compare with this the statement of E. F. Carritt in his, *The Theory of Beauty*, "Beauty is what pleases in the mere contemplation" (p. 6). In fact, our thinkers believe that the

Divine is the greatest artist and the entire universe is His art-creation. Two quotations will suffice,

‘ जगन्निवं समालिख्य स्वात्मन्यात्मतूलिकया
स्वयभेव तदालोक्य प्रीणाति परमेश्वरः ।’

“The Supreme Lord having painted the word-picture with His Own Self as canvas and His Own Self as brush surveys it with the delight of an artist. Oh ! how well it has been painted.”

A beautiful verse in *Lalitopakhyana* portrays the universe as an expression of the ecstatic dance of Siva. As is well known a sentiment is expressed in three ways in dance or drama — *angika*, by means of bodily movements, *vacika*, by means of speech, and *aharya*, by means of relevant dress and decorative ornaments. The verse says that the universe is Siva’s expression in all these three ways,

‘ आंगिकं मुवनं यस्य वाचिकं सर्ववाङ्मयम् ।
आहार्यं चन्द्रतारादि तं नुमः सात्त्विकं शिवम् ॥ ।’

“We bow to the good Lord Siva whose *angika* expression is world upon world in the cosmos, whose *vacika* expression is all sound in the universe, and whose *aharya* or decorative expression is the moon and the stars.”

And *Bhagavadgita* says that all that is beautiful is an expression of the Divine.

‘ यद् यद् विमूर्तिमत् सत्वं श्रीम द्वृज्जितमेव वा ।
तत्तदेवावगच्छ त्वं मम तेजोऽशसम्मवम् ॥ ।’

“Whatsoever is glorious, good, beautiful or lovely, and exalted, know that it issues forth out of a fragment of my splendour.” *(Bh. X, 41)*

So much with regard to beauty and the beautiful. As has already been said, Aesthetics deals with beauty and the beautiful in art. What then is the aesthetic or artistic experience? Visvanatha delineates the aesthetic experience beautifully in the following verse in *Sahityadarapana*:

‘ सत्त्वोद्रेकादखण्डस्वप्रकाशानन्दचिन्मयः ।
वेधानन्तरस्पर्शशून्यो ब्रह्मास्वाददसहोदरः ॥
लोकोत्तरचमचमतकारप्राणः कर्णश्वत् प्रमातृभिः ।
स्वाकारवदभिन्नवेष्ट नायमास्वाद्यते रसः ॥ ।’

(III, 2, 3)

The word *rasa* has been variously translated as 'sentiment', 'motif' etc. I believe aesthetic or artistic experience is the best translation. In the above verse,

(1) अखण्डस्वप्रकाश ओनन्दचिन्मयः : (2) वेदान्तरस्पर्शशून्यः : (3) ब्रह्मास्वादसहदर and (4) लोकोत्तरचमत्कारप्राणः :—

these describe the essence and the nature, the 'what' of the aesthetic experience. 'सत्त्वोद्रेकात्' tells us how it is brought about, the 'why' or the *raison d'être*, the reason of the existence of the experience, 'स्वाकारवदमिन्नत्वेन' gives the 'how' of this experience, i.e., the way in which this experience is relished (आस्वाद्यते) कंशित्प्रमातमिः indicates those who are competent to enjoy the aesthetic experience.

We shall take these up one by one. First of all let us see the 'what' or essence and nature of this experience.

(1) It is अखण्डस्वप्रकाशनन्दचिन्मयः : In this phrase, there are four parts, viz. अखण्ड, स्वप्रकाश, आनन्द, चिन्मय The word *akhanda* means that it is a total experience, a harmonious, integrated whole, not an arithmetical sum of various elements of experience. In the words of modern psychology, it is a *gestalten*. It is *svaprakasa* or self-luminous. It shines by its own light. It is not the object of any extraneous experience. It is *ananda* i.e., it is sheer ecstasy. It is *cinmaya* i.e. it is spiritual experience.

(2) It is वेदान्तरस्पर्शशून्यः : In our ordinary experience, e.g., 'I know a book', there is a distinct consciousness of the knower 'I', and the 'known' (वेदान्तर) i.e., the book. But the aesthetic experience is one in which there is no such consciousness as the 'other', in which the consciousness of the knower as distinct from the known, and of the known as distinct from the knower disappears. It is an intuitive, *immediate* experience. There is only a pervasive consciousness of spiritual ecstasy which swallows up the distinction between the knower and the known.

(3) It is ब्रह्मास्वादसहोदरः : It is akin to the realization of *Brahma* or Self. We have seen that the 'aesthetic experience' has been called वेदान्तरस्पर्शशून्य i.e. an experience in which there is not the slightest trace of consciousness of any object other than that particular experience itself, an experience which is entirely *immediate*. We do not have any other example of such an experience in normal life where the knower and the known are fused into one. If there is any other experience to which it can be likened, it is *Brahmananda*, the ecstasy of the realization of *Brahma* or Self. Self-realization is immediate ecstasy. In it also the distinction between the knower and the known disappears. It is likened to *Brahmananda*, because in both cases the immediate realization of ecstasy comes after the limitations

of the ego-centric attitude are transcended, and the consciousness of any separate thing is completely obliterated in the unity of that experience.

It is, however, only ब्रह्मानन्दसहोदर i.e. only *akin* to the bliss of the realisation of *Brahma*, not *identical* with it, for *brahmananda* is pure *cida-nanda*, whereas the *ananda* of aesthetic experience is associated with human emotions like *rati* etc.

(4) It is लोकोत्तरज्ञमत्कारप्राण : Its life is a transcendent, supermundane *camatkara*. The word *camatkara* is well-nigh untranslatable. It is sudden lightning — like a flash of delightful wonder. In simple words, it is an 'aha!' experience. It is लोकोत्तर i.e. we do not have such experience in normal life. It is transcendent, supermundane experience.

So far with regard to the 'what' or nature and essence of the aesthetic experience.

Now we turn to the 'why' of this experience, that which causes it, which brings it about. The aesthetic experience is due to the exaltation and preponderance of *sattva*. The exaltation of *sattva* connotes that calm, pure state of the mind where the ripples of all external ideas caused by *rajas*, the dark stupefaction caused by *tamas* are obliterated, where, to borrow an expression from Wordsworth, we 'are laid asleep in body and become a living soul.' It is this full flowering of *sattva* that brings about the aesthetic experience.

We may now come to the 'how' of this experience, the way in which it is relished. Visvanatha says that it is relished or enjoyed as one's own being, as an intrinsic, indivisible aspect of oneself (स्वाकारवदमिन्तवेन).

Lastly, Visvanatha adds कैश्चित्प्रमातृभिः: It is not everybody who is competent to have the aesthetic experience. It is only those who are sensitive to beauty that are capable of enjoying this experience. "The eye seeth what it brings the power to 'see' and the ear heareth what it brings the power to 'hear'."

Having seen what artistic experience is, we shall now try to understand what is meant by art.

Various writers have defined art variously. It would be out of place to enter here into a detailed discussion of the long-drawn-out controversy regarding the definition of art among art-critics. I would define art in the following words, "Art is an organic whole presented in a sensuous medium expressive of human emotion."

I give below a brief explanation of this definition. A battle royal has been waged among art critics, over the question whether it is the form or the content, the 'manner' or "matter" the 'how' or the 'what' that is the life and soul of art. Some maintain that it is the content, the matter, the 'what' that is the soul of art. Others aver that it is the form, the manner, the 'how', the way in which a piece of artistic work is presented that contains the secret of its appeal. The controversy is really due to a false abstraction. Really speaking, there is no external relationship between form and content in a work of art. These are not two independent, separate elements juxtaposed in art. They are internally related. All the constituents of art — the elements, the expressive characteristics, the relations, and the motif or the artistic idea constitute an internal relationship. They are so beautifully fused together that they constitute one organic whole so that while they are mentally distinguishable, they are actually inseparable. This is what is meant by saying that art is an organic whole. A work of art is not a mechanical system, but an organic system. In a mechanical system, every element is externally related like bricks in a wall. In an organic system, all the elements are internally related like the organs of an organism. In art, the various elements, the expressive characteristics, the motif and their relation are but part of the nature of each other. No constituent in art can be understood by itself; it has to be understood in its relationship to the whole. *How* something is expressed is *what* is expressed; the 'how' and the 'what', the 'form' and the 'content' are organically related and refer to the whole. In terms of *nyaya* or Indian Logic the relationship between form and content is not one of *samyoga* or conjunction but *samavaya* or inherence. A poem, for instance, is not a collection of mechanically related elements — metre, rhyme, figures of speech and idea, but an integrated whole. Even so, a piece of music is not simply an accumulation of notes, rhythm, tempo, and ornamentation, but a harmonious whole. The beauty of the whole does not consist in the summation of the beauty of its various constituents; it is something *new* and *unique*, something over and above the beauty of the parts, a supernumerary experience, something that pervades all the elements but is not constituted by any one of them singly. Such beauty of the organic whole is known as *lavanya* (loveliness or charm) in Indian Aesthetics.

Art is presented in a sensuous medium, but it uses the medium of sense in order to pass beyond sense. While the medium of presentation is sensuous, the artistic experience enjoyed through this medium is spiritual.

Then there is always an expressive element in art. The expressive element is a sign or symbol of some emotion or emotional quality.

A question that arises here is that music does not refer to anything outside itself; it is an autonomous art; how then can it be expressive of some emotion or emotional quality? The answer is that though music

may not be an iconic or representational art, it is surely an expressive art. It may not refer to anything extra-musical, but surely it touches the heart of every sensitive listener and gives expression to our deepest feelings. Music is surpassingly expressive of joy, hilarity, the heroic sentiment, pathos, exaltation of mood, tension of feeling and its resolution, a sense of wonder relaxation, subtle, soothing peace etc.

Just as in Poetics, the Indian aestheticians classified all the emotions expressed by the art of poetry under three broad heads, named as *gunas* or emotional qualities, even so, I believe, all the emotional qualities aroused by the art of music can be conveniently classified under these heads. *Gunas* according to Mammata, are the inseparable properties, organic constituents of *rasa* or the ecstasy of aesthetic experience. All such emotional qualities may be summed up under three heads, viz.; *madhurya*, *oja* and *prasada*. The connotation of each of these is so rich that it is untranslatable by one word in English. Let us take these up one by one.

(1) *Madhurya*, literally meaning sweetness, charm, grace refers to all those emotional qualities which have tenderness in them. All those emotions which are *drutikaranam* (द्रुतिकारणम्) i.e. in which you feel as if your heart is melting, is being softened and deeply touched come under *madhurya*, e.g., the emotion of love between man and woman, love in devotion towards the Divine, *Karunya* or pathos, *Santi* or deep spiritual peace.

(2) *Oja* is चित्तस्पविस्ताररूपदोषितजनकम् i.e., *Oja* is that which brings about a feeling of expansiveness or exaltation, vigour, grandeur, glory, spaciousness, majesty.

(3) *Prasada* is that which brings about a feeling of pleasing clarity, relaxation, brightness, pellucidness.

All the emotional qualities of the aesthetic experience of music can be summed up under the above heads. Broadly speaking, *madhurya* refers to the graceful, *Oja* to the exciting and the vigorous and *prasada* to the elegant.

Expressiveness is the soul of the aesthetic experience. Technique is only a means; expressiveness is the end. The tragedy that sometimes overtakes Indian music is that what is only a means is generally converted into an end. When technique is indulged in only for the sake of the technique and not as an aid in the development of the *ethos* of the *raga*, it is only mechanically related to the *raga*. Such a performer is not an artiste but an artisan.

While every constituent of a *raga*, if properly executed, leads to expressiveness, the Central Feature which is the soul of expressiveness is *alapti*. *Alapti* is the language of the heart. Our aestheticians of music have laid a good deal of emphasis on *alapti*, and have described its various constituents at length.

All great artistes — Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Ustad Abdul Karim, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Ustad Mushtaq Husain, Pandit Onkar Nath, Ustad Inayat Khan to name only a few, were masters of *alapti*, and brought out the ethos of the *raga* they sang or played beautifully.

Samgita-ratnakara gives the following definition of *alapti*:

वण्लिकार-सम्मना गमकस्थायचित्रिता !
आलप्तिरूच्यते तज्जैर्मिगमनोहरा ॥

“That which is beautifully imbued with *varna*-s and *alamkara*-s, which is variously embellished with *gamaka*-s and *sthaya*-s, and is full of expressiveness of charming shades and inuuendos of feeling is *alapti*”.

While *varna*, *alamkara*, and *gamaka* are still well-known, *sthaya* has been practically forgotten. *Sthaya* literally means “a melodic phrase”, but in the context of *alapti*, it means all those devices by means of which the charm and expressiveness of a *raga* are brought about. *Sathaya*-s are innumerable. *Sangita-ratnakara* lists about ninety-six of them. In some cases only the names of the *sthaya*-s have been mentioned, and it is impossible to form an accurate idea of their connotation. They have mostly to do with voice production, tonal embellishment, variation of voice register, expressive strokes in instrumental music, variation of rhythm and tempo etc. The *gamaka*-s, and *kaku* are also closely associated with these *sthaya*-s.

It is not possible to take up all these in a short paper. I shall only touch upon a few that help in the aesthetic effect of a *raga*. Tonal embellishment is an important aspect. Like a beautiful face, a tone is beautiful in itself, but tonal embellishment is like a sweet and gentle smile in a beautiful face that heightens its beauty all the more.

There are four main forms of vocal musical composition in Hindustani Music, Viz., *Dhruvapada*, *Khyal*, *Thumri*, and *Tappa*.

Dhruvapada is purely classical, grand, sublime, unadorned with finery or foliage. It uses *alapa* only as a prelude to the text of the song. In the text of the song itself, it avoids variation in the delineation of melodic patterns and ornamentation. It has usually four movements, viz., *sthayi*, *antara*, *sancari*, and *abhoga*. Broadly speaking, the *sthayi* contains the

exposition of the melodic motif, the *antara* its development, the *sancari* its denouement, the *abhoga* is finale or conclusion.

Khyal is classico-romantic. It maintains, particularly in the slow tempo, all the sublimity and elegance of *Dhruvapada* and at the same time freely exploits all the graces and ornamentation included in *sthaya*, *gamaka*, and *kaku*. The secret of its appeal lies in the fact that it partakes of the beauty of both the classical and the romantic style. It sums up all the progression of the melody only in two movements viz. *sthayi* and *antara*. It employs *pratigrahanika*, *sthaya-bhanjani*, and *rupaka-bhanjani* — the constituents of *rupaka-alapti* — to the greatest advantage.

Thumri and *Tappa* are romantic in temper. *Thumri* uses slow tempo; *Tappa* uses fast tempo. The main forte of *Thumri* consists in emotional expression by means of varying shades of *kaku*. Complex suggestiveness, awakening vistas of feeling of love and pathos, stirring deep the waters of the spirit by means of sweet, tender imaginative associations constitute the life and soul of this style.

Tappa by its fast tempo expresses the thrills and throbs of the heart, excitement and restlessness.

We shall now see how shades of emotion are expressed by means of *Kaku*. The word *Kaku* is untranslatable by one word in English. It means modulation of voice or tone in such a way as to express a particular emotion or shade of feeling. I shall illustrate it first of all in plain voice without using any musical tone. Take the simple word 'no'. It is just a sign of negation. But see how the emotion association with negation in various cases by modulation of the voice.

Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Ustad Abdul Karim, and Pandit Onkar Nath used *kaku* in their *Khyal* rendering with great effect.

Finally, let us take an example of the expressiveness of a 'pause'. First of all, I shall illustrate this by a few lines of poetry.

There is a poem by Browning entitled "Three Days". The first line is "So, we shall meet in three days". There is a comma, a short pause, after 'so'. But how expressive this pause is. It expresses expectancy, suspense, pangs of separation for three days which appears to be such a long time for lovers.

Take another poem from Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacarita*. Rama has banished Sita. Vasanti meets him in the forest and this is how she rebukes him:

त्वं जीवितं त्वमसि मे हृदयं द्वितीयम्
 त्वं कौमुदी नयनयोरमृतं त्वेभ्यः ।
 इत्यादिभिः प्रियशतेरनुरूप्य मुग्धाम्
 तामेव शान्तमथवा, किमिहोत्तरेण ॥

“You are my life, you are my second heart. You are moonlight to my eyes and ambrosia to my limbs. Having coaxed that innocent, artless one by hundreds of such expressions of endearment, and that every lady, you — or, better be silent! What shall I say further.” A short pause after ‘you’ tells more of the cruelty, and injustice of Rama than any words could. Sometimes a pause whether in poetry or music is more eloquent than speech or song.

Turning now to the *Thumri*. *Alapti* is the soul of *Thumri*. This style employs subtle shades of *kaku* in which there is passionate, pathetic appeal, lingering longing, and heaving sigh. As has already been said, this is a purely romantic style.

Thumri seizes various melodic phrases of a song and brings out the emotions suggested by those phrases in various ways.

This indicates, in brief, the aesthetics of music in general and the aesthetics of the Hindustani musical forms in particular. I have given examples only from vocal music. What I have said about vocal music applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to instrumental music also.

The medium of clay, stone and colour also expresses aesthetic beauty and emotional quality associated with it. Poetry expresses it even better, but nothing can express the subtle nuances of feeling as sound, and much more so, as regulated sound or musical tone. Music is the direct immediate medium for the expression of the innermost feelings of the heart. Walter Pater has rightly said, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music .. It is the art of music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of form and matter. In its ideal consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; and to it, therefore, to the condition of its perfect moments, all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire. ... “Therefore, although each has its incommunicable element, its untranslatable order of impressions its unique mode of reaching ‘the imaginative reason’, yet the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realises.”

Music gives us a new vision of life. Carlyle puts it beautifully, "Music is a kind of inarticulate, unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the infinite, and lets us for moments gaze into that."

Finally, I shall quote three verses from *The Lost Chord* to show what the aesthetic beauty of Music can achieve,

*"I know not what I was playing
Or what was dreaming then;
But I struck on chord of music,
Like the sound of a great Amen,
It quietened pain and sorrow,
Like love overcoming strife;
It seemed the harmonious echo
From our discordant life.
It linked all perplexed meanings
Into one perfect peace,
And trembled away into silence
As if it were loth to cease."*

The aesthetic beauty of music links 'all perplexed meanings into one perfect peace.